

Reach Out to Youngsters

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Ball pythons are generally a great snake to which you can introduce children. Just be careful that no matter what snake you use, you avoid startling it.

When showing a snake to kids who would like to touch the animal, I try to have them do so in an area away from the snake's head. To stay alive, industries and hobbies like ours – reptilekeeping, but also fishkeeping and other types of petkeeping – really need children to develop an interest in them. Luckily, kids and pets are a natural, and most children seem to be born with an inherent interest in animals.

There are things you can do to help interest kids in reptiles and amphibians. If they're your kids, it's really easy. If you've always kept reptiles, you can safely introduce your own animals to your children. Don't force them on them, go slowly. Naturally, children who are raised around reptiles will likely come to appreciate them, love them, and want their own reptile pets.

Outreach programs in schools are a great way to encourage young people's fascination with reptiles. I've visited schools with reptiles in tow, and it's a lot of fun when the class gets into it. Maybe they're into it because watching me talk about reptiles is way more tolerable than having to do math problems or reading assignments, but I think I'm safe in saying that the majority of children to whom I've held snakes out were giggly and loving every minute of it. There's often a shy one or two, but when they see how much fun their classmates are having, they usually come around.

If you have a decent collection, consider approaching the administrative offices of some elementary schools in your area, to see if any of the teachers might be interested in having you give a reptile presentation to any of their classes. Of course you'd want to bring the most kid-friendly animals you have. I personally don't think I would endeavor to bring a huge Nile monitor or a mangrove snake, but corn snakes, kings and other colubrids are always good choices, as are gentle lizards such as bearded dragons and blue-tongued skinks. Of course, no matter what animal you bring there's a chance it could bite, so always be real careful when handling the animals, and in letting the children touch them.

One time a friend's son, Kyle, asked me to come to his class and talk to the students about reptiles. California Zoological Supply in Santa Ana graciously agreed to let me pick through some of their animals to decide which ones I wanted to take with me. One of them was a baby ball python, a very mellow little snake.

Kyle was assisting me, in that he was lifting some of the animals out of their containers before handing them to me. I guess he got a little overexcited, and when he reached in to lift out the ball python, he startled it and it nipped him. It was nothing at all serious, nothing bled, and Kyle didn't need to be rushed to the school nurse or anything like that. But what seemed like an innocent enough activity (Kyle's into reptiles, and had handled them before) did result in a nip. So remember to avoid situations that could lead to any possible problem.

When I show a snake to children I always know where the snake's head is (snake heads...you always need to keep track of what they're up to, as discussed in my January 30 blog, "Always Know What Your Snake's Head Is Doing"). If it seems the kids would like to touch the snake, I hold out a coil that's a safe distance from the head, and encourage them to be very gentle and pet in the direction of the scales. Doing it this way, I've never experienced a mishap.

Shopping malls are another place where it's possible to introduce children, as well as the rest of the public, to reptiles, as are nature centers, fairs, and basically any event or place at which people congregate and that is open to staging special events. When out in public showing reptiles it's important to never force one on a child (or anyone) who's nervous or hesitant. Go slow to encourage the safest interaction, for both reptile and human.

Other than providing one-on-one interaction with reptiles, there are other ways to interest young people in reptiles even if you don't personally own any. Offer to take them to a reptile expo (see listings for reptile shows here), a reptile store, or maybe a herp society meeting. Of course kids love zoos, and the reptile department at most zoos is always very popular.

Give them a cool reptile book. As a matter of fact, I have written three children's books about reptiles: Lizards, Snakes and Turtles and Tortoises. Each of these books in the Beginning Vivarium Systems series is an introduction to the fascinating world of these animals, and provides both captive care basics and natural history information. There are stickers, too!

Of course, you could also give a child a subscription to REPTILES magazine (you can subscribe right here). In case you didn't know, the magazine features a very popular children's section called "HerpKidz," which includes puzzles, pictures of kids with their pet reptiles and other fun kid stuff. Some of the "HerpKidz" games, puzzles and more get archived on ReptileChannel; [click here](#) to take a look.

Think about ways you can ignite an interest in reptiles in children. It'll do your heart good, the hobby good and, of course, the children will learn about one of the most rewarding hobbies there is!

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